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Big Losses Projected For Lower Rio Grande Valley Agriculture Due To Water Shortages *Mexico continues to hold water owed to the U.S.*

Washington, D.C. – A [recent report](#) by Texas A&M's Center for North American Studies estimates a potential 2024 total loss in economic output of over \$993.2 million due to the absence of irrigation water for crop production in the Lower Rio Grande Valley (LRGV) region, which includes Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, and Willacy counties. The lack of irrigation water is in large part due to Mexico's failure to deliver water to the U.S. per the 1944 Water Treaty. According to the report, the current Mexican water deficit is the second-largest deficit in the last three decades.

The U.S. and Mexico share the water of the Rio Grande under the Treaty for the "Utilization of waters of the Colorado and Tijuana Rivers and of the Rio Grande." The Treaty obligates Mexico to deliver a minimum of 350,000 acre-feet annually, on average, over a five-year cycle. Now in year four of the current five-year cycle, Mexico owes over 736,000 acre-feet of water. Of the 1,113,288 acre-feet of water owed to the U.S. this cycle, Mexico has only delivered 376,915 acre-feet of water.

Given the severity of the deficiency and the impact on the LRGV water allocations, in late November of 2023, Congresswoman Monica De La Cruz and Congressman Henry Cuellar led passage of a House Resolution to express support for the diplomatic relations required to encourage the Government of Mexico to fulfill its water deliveries on an annual basis to the United States under the treaty. A Senate version co-sponsored by Senators Cornyn and Cruz is pending in the Senate.

The report examines the total economic impact on LRGV agricultural production, which consists of row crops (cotton, sorghum, etc.), specialty crops (vegetables, citrus, and sugarcane), and absent irrigation water. The loss of irrigated crop production in the LRGV region would lead to an estimated \$993.2 million of losses in economic output (direct, indirect, and induced). In terms of employment, it would result in an estimated loss of over 8,000 jobs (full and part-time).



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Agriculture representatives and farmers of the LRGV are unfortunately not surprised by the results of this report given the decades-old pattern of Mexico undersupplying their agreed commitment under the Treaty.

“I’ve been in the agriculture business for more years than I can count, and one consistent impediment to the LRGV’s maximum success has been Mexico failing to reliably and predictably give us the water that is owed,” said **Dale Murden, President, Texas Citrus Mutual**. “You can’t turn the orchards on and off. It takes years to cultivate the trees for maximum production. Once the water stops, the trees can only survive for so long before they must be removed, and they won’t come back.”

The report documents similar impacts on vegetables and sugarcane production. Production of those crops would be lost as well without the irrigation water that the LRGV growers count on. “Estimated economic losses at the farm-level would be the 5-year average value of production, \$108.5 and \$98.5 million for vegetable and sugarcane production, respectively,” cites the report.

“Our sugarcane farmers have been raising cane in the LRGV since the early 1970’s. As one of only three states left in the U.S. producing sugarcane, there must be a sense of urgency to getting water that is owed to the U.S.,” said **Sean Brashear, President & CEO, Rio Grande Valley Sugar Growers**. “The sugar mill in Santa Rosa must have enough sugarcane grown in the area to remain viable. Our employees and the businesses we support are depending on us to keep open the only sugar operation left in the State of Texas.”

The LRGV is one of the few places in the U.S. that can grow vegetables during the winter months, with 70% of the state’s total fresh fruit & vegetable production coming from the Rio Grande Valley. Producers have had to make difficult decisions on which crops to plant or to not plant at all. “Farmers have already stopped planting items like broccoli and celery, and soon we may not have onions, kale, cabbage, or other staples. We are seeing vegetable and fruit plantings down 25-100% depending on the crop,” said **Dante Galeazzi, President & CEO, Texas International Produce Association**. “Not only are the farmers getting crushed by the lack of water, but the jobs that are associated with fresh fruits and vegetables, from the harvest to packaging, selling, transportation and down the line.”

Stakeholders from the farming community, irrigation districts, and businesses have engaged with the International Boundary Water Commission (IBWC), which oversees and implements the Treaty, to impress upon the urgency of this crisis. IBWC Commissioner Dr. Giner has met several times with stakeholders and is currently engaged with the Mexican Government on this issue. However, there have been no statements of pending water deliveries to the U.S.

“As a LRGV farmer, I cannot express more strongly the need for the current Administration to escalate this issue. South Texas not only needs the water to produce crops but also to ensure



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water is available for residential use,” **Brian Jones, farmer and Texas Farm Bureau, State Director, District 13.** “Not only is irrigation water used for agricultural purposes, but it serves as the ‘push’ to move water into residential systems; without it, our irrigation districts’ ability to supply water to all users is in jeopardy. This is not just a farmer problem.”

Along with stakeholder outreach, the LRGV members of Congress, Reps. Monica De La Cruz, Henry Cuellar, Vicente Gonzalez, and Texas Senators Cornyn and Cruz have all engaged with the Administration on this crisis.

Predictable and reliable water deliveries from Mexico per the Treaty are critical to the LRGV. Since the Treaty was signed, Mexico has built dams and reservoirs to capture the water that should be flowing to the U.S. This report shows the economic ramifications of those actions, which have led to unreliable and unpredictable water deliveries. The LRGV needs the water, and they need it now.

Please contact Dr. Luis A. Ribera, Ph.D. from TAMU, for more information about the study.

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